



Tales from a Sisters Naturalist by Jim Anderson

Coyotes, coyotes and more coyotes

Jodi Schneider McNamee's story, "Minipoodle rescues furry companion," (*The Nugget*, November 4, page 1) reminded me of the way coyotes have spread all over the USA over the years, from the desert southwest to Chicago, Astoria, New England, L.A. and all points in between.

Way back, when European-Americans began to spread all over North America, coyotes were pretty much limited to the southwest, making a living on carrion, rodents, rabbits and other small prey. If a coyote invaded wolf territory it was usually curtains for said coyote. The indigenous peoples enjoyed creating coyotes tales at story-telling time that made children laugh — and look over their shoulder.

When I established various nature programs at Sunriver in the early '70s, a woman who lived on the edge of the golf course walked into the Ecologium

one day ecstatic about coyotes. ("Ecologium," was the original land-planner Bob Royston's term for the Nature Center.)

"Oh, how I love this place," she sang, "the coyotes come right up to my home and play with my little Scotty dog."

That gave me the willies. I attempted to explain to that dear woman that coyote's "play" was different than what she was used to, and her little Scotty dog might end up in a heap of trouble. In my heart of hearts, I knew poor Scotty was doomed.

About a week later, that same woman came flying into my office, out of her mind. "I hate this place!" she shouted. "I just hate this place! Do you know what happened this morning...? Those #\$@&%*! coyotes killed my little Scotty and ran off with him!"

I felt really bad as she broke down weeping uncontrollably.

That's what coyotes do.

How did we get so infested with coyotes? It began almost 200 years ago, when wolves discovered "anthropogenic foods" were far easier to catch than elk and rabbits.

"Get rid of those wolves!" the early settlers shouted, and the U.S. Government, being sympathetic to the cries of those trying to make a living off America's cornucopia of nature, responded with guns, traps and poison.

In a relatively short time the native wolf was a

memory. All the government trappers had to do was set their traps, spread their poison around the wolf's territory, dig out the puppies, shoot the stragglers — and the job was done.

In spite of all the Chief Paulinas and Geronimos, the European invaders following Daniel Boone's ways went deeper into the southwestern parts of North America; Texas first, then New Mexico and Arizona, where they met up with "You-Know-Who."

It was the sheep people who had most of the trouble. They thought the wide open grasslands and sagebrush of the Wild West was theirs for the taking, and put their sheep on it. (They also brought us cheat grass, knapweed, etc.)

The coyotes must have thought they'd died and gone to heaven. How could they resist those roly-poly, delicious wooly things? Forget chasing rabbits and waiting for voles to come out of their tunnels. Sheep were a lot easier to catch, kill and eat, and there were SO MANY of them!

"Get rid of those coyotes!" the sheep people shouted. "Yes, sir!" said the U.S. Government. They hired the trappers that had so quickly removed wolves from the landscape, who got right to work trapping, poisoning, shooting, digging pups out of dens, using every tool they could think of — even encouraging ranchers and hunters to follow their lead.



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Wiley J. Coyote, and his clan. Wily they are — clever, sneaky, adaptable.

BUT...

The one thing all those eager killers overlooked was the adaptability of coyotes. Within 50 years coyotes were no longer territorial, or monogamous. Ever adaptable, they became polygamous wanderers.

Instead of a pair of coyotes working a given territory, one male and up to three females roamed the countryside making a living. Instead of a female having three or so pups, they had five — sometimes eight — and from that point on coyotes kept right on begetting and roaming.

Instead of eliminating coyotes, indiscriminate killing by government trappers and sport shooters did just the opposite — they sent coyotes exploring new territories in greater numbers, which is what they're still

doing at this very moment in Boston, Chicago, and L.A.

To make life with coyotes even more interesting, researchers at North Carolina State (NCS) in Raleigh studying wolf/coyote populations of the East (including Canada) have discovered that old enemies have joined, along with domestic dogs, in what has resulted in the "coywolf." This is a predator of enormous talent that can take down a moose and also eat small rodents for dessert — and they are said to number in the tens of thousands.

Have we learned anything? I doubt it. We're still killing coyotes indiscriminately. Coyote will just still keep looking for new places to do his thing, like in my backyard or yours.



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